

The Choice We Must Face  
**Democracy and Imperialism,  
 Or Democracy and Standards?**

Irving Babbitt

IN OUR RECENT CRUSADE to make the world safe for democracy [World War I] it was currently assumed that democracy is the same as liberty and the opposite of imperialism. The teachings of history are strangely different. Democracy in the sense of direct and unlimited democracy is, as was pointed out long ago by Aristotle, the death of liberty; in virtue of its tyrannical temper, it is likewise, in the broad sense in which I have been using the term, closely akin to imperialism.\* Now the distinction of Rousseau is, as we have seen, to have been the most uncompromising of all modern theorists of direct democracy. How far have the actual results of Rousseauism justified Aristotle rather than those who have anticipated from the diffusion of the Rousseauistic evangel, a paradise of liberty, equality, and fraternity? The commanding position of Rousseau in the democratic movement is at all events beyond question, though even here it is possible to exaggerate. "Democracy," says M. de Vogüé, "has only one father—Rousseau. . . . The great muddy stream which is submerging us flows from the writings and the life of Rousseau like the Rhine and the Po from the Alpine reservoirs which feed them perpetually."<sup>1</sup> It is interesting to place alongside of this and similar passages which might be multiplied indefinitely, passages<sup>2</sup> from German authorities, likewise very numerous, to the effect that Rousseau is more than any other person the father of their *Kultur*. Here, too, one must

\*By "imperialism" Babbitt refers to arbitrary assertiveness not only among nations but also among individuals and groups.

*Irving Babbitt, who taught French and comparative literature at Harvard from 1894 to 1933, was one of the leading social and cultural thinkers of his time. This article is adapted from the chapters entitled "Democracy and Imperialism" and "Democracy and Standards" in Babbitt's 1924 classic, Democracy and Leadership.*

allow for an element of exaggeration. Much in Germany that is often ascribed to Rousseau may be traced to English influences, the same influences that acted on Rousseau himself.

Passages of the kind I have just cited seem to establish a first connection between *Kultur*, which has come to be regarded as in its essence imperialistic, and Rousseauistic democracy. *Kultur*, when closely scrutinized, breaks up into two main elements—on the one hand, scientific efficiency, and on the other, a nationalistic enthusiasm to which this efficiency is made to minister. The relationship to Rousseauism must evidently be looked for first of all in the second of these elements, that of nationalistic enthusiasm. . . . According to the new ethics, virtue is not restrictive but expansive, a sentiment and even an intoxication. In its unmodified natural form, it has its basis in pity which may finally develop into the virtue of

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the great cosmopolitan souls of whom he speaks in the *Second Discourse*, who transcend national frontiers and embrace the whole of the human race in their benevolence. We are here at the headwaters of the sentimental internationalism of the past century. But Rousseau, as I have already said, distinguishes sharply between the virtue of man simply as man and the virtue of the citizen. When man is "denatured" by entering the state, his virtue is still a sentiment and even an intoxication, but is very far from being cosmopolitan. Rousseau oscillates between the two types of virtue, that of the man and that of the citizen, and can scarcely be said to have attempted

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a serious mediation between them. According as he wants the one or the other type of "virtue," he devises different systems of education. In *Emile*, for example, he sets out to make a man, in the "Considerations on the Government of Poland," a citizen. The love of country and the love of mankind are, he declares, incompatible passions.<sup>3</sup> What is Rousseau's own choice, one may ask, as between an emotional nationalism and an emotional internationalism? On this point no doubt is possible. The love of country he takes to be the more beautiful passion. The virtuous intoxication of the internationalist seems to him pale and ineffectual compared with the virtuous intoxication of the citizen; and herein history has certainly confirmed him. The fact that *l'ivresse patriotique* may make the citizens of one country ruthless in their dealings with the citizens of other countries seems to him a matter of small moment.<sup>4</sup> In his schemes for inbreeding patriotic sentiment, he seems to be looking forward to the type of nationalism that has actually emerged during the last century, especially perhaps in Germany. The question of war becomes acute if Europe, and possibly the world, is thus to be made up of states, each animated by what one is tempted to term a frenzied nationalism, without any countervailing principle of unity. That the new nationalism is more potent than the new internationalism was revealed in August 1914 when millions of socialists, in response to the call of country, marched away to the slaughter of their fellow socialists in other lands. That Protestant unity has likewise proved inadequate seems sufficiently clear from the fact that the men of the two chief Protestant countries, at the same time that they were blowing one another to pieces with high explosives, sought to starve one another's women and children *en masse*. The papacy again, representing the traditional unity of European civilization, has also shown itself unable to limit effectively the push of nationalism.

Furthermore, nationalities of the kind that have grown up in modern Europe will not, as Rousseau points out, be kept from fighting with one another by treaties and alliances. He warns the Poles that among the Christian nations, treaties and alliances are only scraps of paper . . . Rousseau shows much shrewdness in reviewing . . . the problem of peace and war in Europe from the Middle Ages down. One institution, he admits, had done much in the past to lessen political conflicts. It is undeniable, he says, that Europe owes to Christianity above all, even today, the species of union that has survived among its members. He goes on to say, anticipating Heine and following Hobbes, that Rome, having suffered material defeat, sent her dogmas instead of her legions into the provinces. To this spiritual Rome, medieval and modern

Europe has owed what small equivalent it has enjoyed of the *Pax romana*. The ultimate binding element in the medieval order was subordination to the divine will and its earthly representatives, notably the pope. The latter Middle Ages and the Renaissance saw a weakening of this principle of union and the rise of great territorial nationalities. According to the school of Grotius, the relations of these nationalities are to be regulated primarily not by will in any sense, but by reason. The Abbé de Saint-Pierre, perhaps the earliest complete French example of the professional philanthropist, has a still more naive confidence in reason. He saw well enough, says Rousseau, how his schemes would work if they were once established, but was childish (and herein he resembled other "reformers" down to the present day) in his notions of the means for getting them established. His fundamental error, Rousseau complains, was in thinking that men are governed by their reason, when they are in reality governed by their passions.<sup>5</sup> . . .

**T**HOUGH ROUSSEAU can speak on occasion with positive contempt of cosmopolitans, he can be shown to have exercised his main influence on those who began by standing, both nationally and internationally, for fraternity, a fraternity that was to be ideally combined with liberty and equality. We need to trace briefly the imperialistic upshot of this evangel, especially in the French Revolution, and then, turning away from the more peripheral aspects of the relation between democracy and imperialism, to try to get at the root of the whole matter in the psychology of the individual.

Rousseau, we have seen, seeks to discredit not merely a particular aristocracy, but the aristocratic principle in general. "The people," he says, "constitute the human race": all that is not the people is parasitic and "scarcely deserves to be counted were it not for the harm it does." Perhaps no doctrine has ever been more cunningly devised to fill the poor man and the plebeian with self-righteous pride, and at the same time to inflame him with hatred and suspicion of those who enjoy any social or economic superiority. It is a curious fact, known to all students of the period, that those who perhaps did the most to promote Rousseauism, and in general the new philanthropy, were the members of the privileged classes themselves. The causes of this strange phenomenon are complex, but have been traced with sufficient accuracy by Taine in his *Ancien Régime*. The members of the French aristocracy, and that as far back as Richelieu and Louis XIV, had largely ceased to perform the work of an aristocracy. They had become drawing-room butterflies and hangers-on at court. Now the enemy of those who have ceased to work, in some sense or other of the word,

has always been ennui; and in addition, the denizens of the drawing-room suffered during the first half of the eighteenth century from rationalistic dryness and an excess of artificial decorum. They finally sought relief in a return to nature and the simple life. An idyllic element had been present in the life of the drawing-room from the start, as all know who have studied the influence of d'Urfé's *Astrée* on the Marquise de Rambouillet and her group; and this perhaps made the way easier for another form of pastoralism. "The fops," as Taine phrases it, "dreamt between two madrigals of the happiness of sleeping naked in the virgin forest." Marie Antoinette milked her own cows and lived the pastoral dream at the Petit Trianon. Many of the nobles and higher clergy, won over to the new enthusiasm, took oath to divest themselves of all the privileges of rank in favor of the new equality which was itself to be only a preliminary to the golden dawn of brotherhood. The advent of this brotherhood was actually celebrated in the Federation of the Champ de Mars (1790) which was meant to symbolize the melting of all Frenchmen together in a fraternal embrace. Anacharsis Cloots, the "orator of humankind," had representatives of the different races and nations of the Earth, each appropriately garbed, parade before the National Assembly as the symbol of a still more universal fraternity. "Never," says the Comte de Ségur, "were more delightful dreams followed by a more terrible awakening." Instead of universal brotherhood there was a growing mania of suspicion. The malady of Rousseau became epidemic, until, at the height of the Terror, men were "suspect of being suspect." The very persons who had rushed into one another's arms at the Federation of the Champ de Mars began to guillotine one another. In the number of those who thus perished was the "orator of mankind." Among the earliest victims were the members of the privileged classes who had been so zealous in promoting the new philanthropy, just as the parlor socialists of our own day would be among the first to suffer if the overturn they are preaching should actually occur. As Chesterton says, if the social revolution takes place, the streets will run red with the blood of philanthropists.

If one wishes to enter into the psychology of the later stages of the Revolution, one should devote special attention to avowed disciples of Rousseau like Robespierre. He adopts in a rather uncompromising form Rousseau's view of "virtue," and so is led to set up an "ideal" France over against the real France, and this "ideal" France is largely a projection of what I have termed the idyllic imagination. The opposition that he established between the virtuous and the vicious is even less an opposition between virtuous and vicious individuals than

between whole classes of individuals. The judging of men by their social grouping rather than by their personal merits and demerits, that seemed to Burke so iniquitous, has as a matter of fact, been implicit in the logic of this movement from the French to the Russian Revolution. Danton already says: "These priests, these nobles are not guilty, but they must die, because they are out of place, interfere with the movement of things, and will stand in the way of the future." Danton, so far as he was responsible for the September Massacres, made some application of this revolutionary logic. Leaders like Robespierre and Saint-Just, however, developed it far more than Danton into a program of wholesale proscription. The actual France was too rich and populous. Robespierre and Saint-Just were ready to eliminate violently whole social strata that seemed to them to be made up of parasites and conspirators, in order that they might adjust this actual France to the Sparta of their dreams; so that the Terror was far more than is commonly realized a bucolic episode.<sup>6</sup> It lends color to the assertion that has been made that the last stage of sentimentalism is homicidal mania.

In theory, Robespierre is, like Rousseau, rigidly egalitarian. He is not a real leader at all—only the people's "hired man." But at critical moments, in the name of an ideal general will, of which he professes to be only the organ, he is ready to impose tyrannically *his* will on the

actual people. The net result of the Rousseauistic movement is thus not to get rid of leadership, but to produce an inferior and even insane type of leadership, and in any case leadership of a highly imperialistic type. This triumph of force can be shown to be the total outcome of liberty, equality, and fraternity in the Rousseauistic sense. Rousseau himself . . . would force people to be free. The attempt to combine freedom with equality led, and, according to Lord Acton, always will lead, to terrorism. As for Jacobinical fraternity, it has been summed up in the phrase: "Be my brother or I'll kill you." Moreover, the clash of a leader like Robespierre is not only with enemies of the Revolution, but with other more or less sincere revolutionary fanatics whose imaginations are projecting different "ideals." The sole common denominator of leaders thus obstinate, each in the pursuit of a separate dream, is force. The movement had repudiated the traditional controls, and so far as any new principle of cohesion was concerned, had turned out to be violently centrifugal. The only brotherhood the Jacobinical leaders had succeeded in founding was, as Taine puts it, a brotherhood of Cains.

Robespierre, however, was not the type of leader finally destined to emerge from the Revolution. As early as 1790 Burke had predicted that the Revolution would turn at last to the profit of some military adventurer. The doctrine of popular sovereignty as developed from the *Social Contract* had been found to encourage a sort of chronic anarchy. Inasmuch as society cannot go on without discipline of some kind, men were constrained, in the absence of any other form of discipline, to turn to discipline of the military type. In the army it was still possible to find the orderly subordination and loyalty to acknowledged merit that the Jacobins had, on principle, been undermining in civil France. Bonaparte is therefore no accident. He is the true heir and executor of the Revolution. After his grenadiers had chased members of the Cinq-Cents through the doors and out of the windows of the Orangerie at Saint-Cloud (18 Brumaire), and when he had revealed himself more and more nakedly as the imperialistic superman, it is not to be supposed that the Jacobins as a body stood aloof. What became apparent, on the contrary, was the affinity that has always existed between an unlimited democracy and the cult of ruthless power. No one crawled more abjectly at the feet of Napoleon than some of the quondam Terrorists. "On the point of becoming barons and counts, the Jacobins spoke only of the horrors of 1793, of the necessity of punishing the proletarians and of repressing popular excesses. From day to day there was taking place the transformation of republicans into imperialists and of the tyranny of all into the despotism of a single man."<sup>7</sup> . . .

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I have been trying to make clear the relation between Rousseauistic democracy and imperialism in France itself. The same relationship appears if we study the Rousseauistic movement internationally. Perhaps no movement since the beginning of the world has led to such an inbreeding of national sentiment of the type that in the larger states runs over very readily into imperialistic ambition. I have said that the Revolution almost from the start took on the character of a universal crusade. The first principles it assumed made practically all existing governments seem illegitimate. The various peoples were invited to overthrow these governments, based upon usurpation, and, having recovered their original rights, to join with France in a glorious fraternity. What followed is almost too familiar to need repetition. Some of the governments whose legitimacy was thus called into question took alarm and, having entered into an alliance, invaded France.<sup>8</sup> This foreign menace moved France to the first great burst of national enthusiasm in the modern sense. The cry of the revolutionary army—*Vive la nation*—heard by Goethe in a pause of the cannonading of Valmy—was rightly taken by him to mark the dawn of a new era.<sup>9</sup> The beginnings of the very type of warfare we have recently been witnessing in Europe, that is, the coming together of whole nations for mutual massacre (*la levée en masse*), go back to this period. The new national enthusiasm supplied France with soldiers so numerous and so spirited that she not only repelled her invaders, but began to invade other countries in turn, theoretically on a mission of emancipation. In the actual stress of events, however, the will to power turned out to be stronger than the will to brotherhood, and what had begun as a humanitarian crusade ended in Napoleon and imperialistic aggression. This aggression awakened in turn the new national sentiment in various countries, and did more than all other agencies combined to prepare the way for a powerful and united Germany.<sup>10</sup> France ceased to be the “Christ of nations” and became the traitor to humankind universally denounced by the disillusioned radicals of the time, especially after the invasion of Switzerland (1798).<sup>11</sup>

Anyone who rejects the humanitarian theory of brotherhood runs the risk of being accused of a lack of fraternal feeling. The obvious reply of the person of critical and experimental temper is that, if he rejects the theory, it is precisely because he desires brotherhood. After an experience of the theory that has already extended over several generations, the world would seem at times to have become a vast seething mass of hatred and suspicion. What Carlyle wrote of the Revolution has not ceased to be applicable: “Beneath this rose-colored

veil of universal benevolence is a dark, contentious, hell-on-earth.” One is finally led to the conviction that the contrast between the ideal and the real in this movement is not the ordinary contrast between the willingness of the spirit and the weakness of the flesh; that on the contrary this particular field of union among men actually promotes the reality of strife that it is supposed to prevent. One might without being too fanciful establish a sort of synchronism between the prevalence of pacifistic schemes and the actual outbreak of war. The propaganda of the Abbé de Saint-Pierre was followed by the wars of Frederick the Great. The humanitarian movement of the end of the eighteenth century, which found expression in Kant’s treatise on “Perpetual Peace,” was followed and attended by twenty years of the bloodiest fighting the world has ever known. The pacifist agitation of the early twentieth century, that found outer expression in the Peace Palace at The Hague, was succeeded by battle lines hundreds of miles long. The late M. Boutroux, whom no one will accuse of being a cynic, said to a reporter of the *Temps* in 1912 that from the amount of peace talk abroad, he inferred that the future was likely to be “supremely warlike and bloody.” . . .

From a strictly psychological point of view,\* the movement we are studying had not only produced all its characteristic fruits over a hundred years ago, but also its two outstanding and truly significant personalities—Rousseau and Napoleon. If there had been no Rousseau, Napoleon is reported to have said, there would have been no Revolution, and without the Revolution, I should have been impossible. Now Rousseau may be regarded as being more than any other one person the humanitarian Messiah. Napoleon, for his part, may be defined, in Hardy’s phrase, as the Christ of War. So that the humanitarian Messiah set in motion forces that led by a process that I have attempted to sketch in rough general outline to the rise of a Christ of War.

A remarkable feature of the humanitarian movement, on both its sentimental and utilitarian sides, has been its preoccupation with the lot of the masses. “All institutions,” says Condorcet, for example, “ought to have for their aim the physical, intellectual, and moral amelioration of the poorest and most numerous class.” But on the utilitarian no less than on the sentimental side of the movement, the contrast between the ideal and the real is so flagrant as to suggest some central omission in humanitarian psychology. If the Rousseauist set up an

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\*Here as elsewhere Babbitt uses the word “psychological” in a sense roughly equivalent to “philosophical,” indicating that the evidence involved is not metaphysical but a matter of concrete and universal human experience.

ideal of universal brotherhood that led actually to universal conscription, the utilitarian for his part has put prime emphasis on material organization and efficiency and so, with the aid of physical science, has gradually built up an enormous mass of interlocking machinery which was, in theory, to serve humanity and promote the greatest good of the greatest number, but has in practice been pressed into the service of the will to power of individuals and social groups and nationalities. As a result of the coming together of the various factors I have enumerated, war has become almost inconceivably maleficent. The chief victims have been the very masses whom both Rousseauist and Baconian have professed themselves so eager to benefit. The clashes between states and coalitions of states have, under existing conditions, become clashes between Frankenstein monsters. . . .

**T**HE WHOLE Occident, and increasingly, indeed, the whole world, is now faced with a similar problem as to the quality of the "soul" that animates the vast mechanism of material efficiency, to the building up of which the Occident has for several generations past been devoting its main effort. Is this "soul" a Rousseauistic or a genuinely ethical "soul"? One is tempted to define the civilization (or what we are pleased to term such) that has been emerging with the decline of the traditional controls as a mixture of altruism and high explosives. If anything is amiss with the altruism, the results may prove to be rather serious. The idealists affirm either that man is so lovely in his natural self that he needs no control at all, or else that he can be induced to exercise the necessary control with reference to the good of his fellows. Everything hinges, in either case, on the presence in the natural man of an element of love or will to service that is of itself a sufficient counterpoise to the natural man's will to power. Here is the dividing line between egoists and altruists, and not merely in the appeal to utility. . . .

A gross and palpable error of the era that is just closing has been the confusion of mechanical and material progress with moral progress. Physical science is excellent in its own place, but when supreme moral issues are involved, it is, as has been rightly remarked, only a multiplying device.<sup>12</sup> If there is rightness at the center, it will no doubt multiply the rightness. If, on the other hand, there is any central error, the peripheral repercussion, with men bound together as they are at present, will be terrific. With the development of inventions like the radio and the wireless telephone, the whole world is becoming, in a very literal sense, a whispering-gallery. It is hardly necessary to dilate on what is likely to follow if the words that are whispered are words of hatred and

suspicion. An increasing material union among men who remain spiritually centrifugal means . . . a triumph . . . of the law of cunning and the law of force . . . on a scale to which the past has seen no parallel. Superlatives are dangerous things, but one is perhaps justified in describing the present situation as one of unexampled gravity.

In dealing with democracy and the special type of fraternity it has preached, as related to imperialism, I have thus far been confining myself for the most part to the national and international phases of this relationship. It is time to fulfill my promise, and, working in from the periphery toward the center, seek to get at the root of the whole matter in the psychology of the individual. For behind all imperialism is ultimately the imperialistic individual, just as behind all peace is ultimately the peaceful individual.

I have already made a distinction of the first importance for the study of the question of war or peace in terms of the individual, and that is the distinction between the traditional Christian conception of liberty, which implies spiritual subordination, and the Rousseauistic conception which, whether we take it in the no-state of the *Second Discourse* or the all-state of the *Social Contract*, is resolutely egalitarian. At the end of his "Prometheus Unbound" Shelley has portrayed in the very spirit of the *Second Discourse* the paradise that is to result from the abolition of the traditional subordinations and inequalities:

The loathsome mask has fallen, the man remains  
Scepterless, free, uncircumscribed, but man  
Equal, unclassed, tribeless and nationless,  
Exempt from awe, worship, degree.

But on any attempt to carry out this program, the enormous irony and contradiction at the very heart of this movement becomes manifest. It leads one to break down standards in the real world in favor of purely chimerical ideals. For what actually follows the attempt to establish egalitarian liberty, we need to turn from Shelley to Shakespeare:

Take but degree away, untune that string,  
And hark, what discord follows! each thing meets  
In mere oppugancy: . . . . .  
. . . . .  
Then every thing includes itself in power,  
Power into will, will into appetite.

This last line reminds one of a remark of Jeremy Taylor that, in the absence of ethical control, "men know no good but to please a wild, indetermined, infinite appetite." The word infinite adds an essential idea.

Other animals have appetite, but within certain definite bounds, whereas man is, either in good or bad sense, the infinite animal. Machiavelli is very metaphorical when he speaks of his prince as combining the virtues of the lion and the fox. The lion and the fox do not put forth their power or cunning beyond what is needed for the satisfaction of their actual physical wants. They do not strive to set up a vulpine or leonine empire over other animals. One cannot truthfully say of them, as Carlyle says of his boot-black, that, if given half the universe, they will soon be quarreling with the owner of the other half. To be sure, as Swift remarks,

Now and then

Beasts may degenerate into men.

But, as a rule, the man who is infinite after the fashion of Carlyle's boot-black is in a fair way to become not beastly, but fiendish. As a result of his infinitude, man is almost necessarily either better or worse than other animals. His prime need is not, as in the case of other animals, to satisfy certain limited physical wants, but to keep in good conceit with himself. Now it is of the essence of conceit, a word which, as once used, was synonymous with imagination in general, and as now used is nearly related to the egocentric type of imagination, to strain out toward the unlimited. This conceit is, it is to be feared, closely associated in unregenerate man with envy and jealousy of anyone whose conceit seems to set up rival pretensions to his own. Conceit also determines largely man's attitude toward the truth. Truth according to the natural law\* he welcomes because it ministers to his power or comfort and in any case piques his wonder and curiosity. Spiritual truth is less welcome because it diminishes his conceit. Truth in this sense, as Goethe says, is less congenial to human nature than error, because it imposes limitations, whereas error does not. Tell the average person that some one is planning to get into wireless communication with Mars, or to shoot a rocket at the moon, and he is all respectful interest and attention at once. Tell him, on the contrary, that he needs, in the interest of his own happiness, to walk in the path of humility and self-control, and he will be indifferent, or even actively resentful.

Man's conceit, and the tendency toward unlimited expansion that it gives to the impulses of the natural man is of various types. Perhaps as good a classification as any of the main types is that of the three lusts distinguished

by traditional Christianity—the lust of knowledge, the lust of sensation, and the lust of power. It is interesting to study the lust of power as it has appeared in the conquerors and great military adventurers of history. Saint-Evremond has made some penetrating observations on this form of imperialistic psychology in his "Dissertation on the Word Vast." The vastness that the great dominators have displayed in their projects and ambitions is due, as he points out, to the quality of their imaginations. The outward straining of the imagination toward the unlimited Saint-Evremond takes to be the weakness and not the strength of a Pyrrhus, an Alexander and a Richelieu. It is a pity that Saint-Evremond was not able to extend his scrutiny to a Napoleon. Napoleon plainly displayed two entirely different types of "vision": in dealing with the natural order, in planning a battle, for instance, he showed himself capable of a tremendous concentration upon the facts; but in his political ambitions, where factors of a more purely human order came into play, he revealed an inability to limit his imagination that was destined sooner or later to result in disaster. The coming together of the two kinds of vision I have just defined gives a type with which we have become very familiar, not only in our political and military, but in our

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commercial leaders—that of the efficient megalomaniac. A surprising number of these leaders have been, in intention at least, supermen, and little Napoleons.

Assuming that Napoleon's imagination is of the general type that Saint-Evremond ascribes to various great dominators of the past, we still have to explain, if we are to understand the triumph of the imperialistic push for power over Rousseauistic idealism, why a Napoleon so captivates the imagination of other men; for this sort of leader would evidently be helpless unless he had many accomplices. The Rousseauist, I have said, breaks down traditional controls without setting up new ones. What emerges in the many men who have as a result lapsed to the naturalistic level is not the will to brotherhood, but the will to power; so that in this sense the Rousseauist is actually promoting what he is in theory seeking to prevent. For what follows we need to make an application of Freudian psychology to a *libido* even more fundamental perhaps than the *libido* with which the Freudians themselves have thus far been chiefly concerned—namely, the *libido dominandi*. In a naturalistic

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\*By the term "natural law" Babbitt refers to the principles of the natural sciences. What moral philosophers have traditionally termed the "natural law" Babbitt calls the "law for man."

era, the average man finds himself more or less in the state of Carlyle's boot-black, but is at the same time hampered on every side and kept from expanding freely along the lines of power, and is thus diminished in his conceit of himself. He suffers from repressed and thwarted desire. But what he is unable to get directly, he may secure vicariously. At this point one begins to perceive the meaning of Hardy's description of Napoleon as the Christ of War. The spell that Napoleon exercised was not merely over the former Jacobins . . . but over the French masses. Let one reflect on the way these masses rallied to him on the return from Elba, and that, too, after he had wrought them almost incalculable evil:

Bien, dit-on, qu'il nous ait nui,  
Le peuple encore le révère, etc.

I have said that to look on the state of Burke with its ethical leadership as merely "pooled self-esteem" is misleading. The phrase has a certain relevancy, however, when applied to the state that is under Napoleonic leadership. The intrusion of this imperialistic element is strong not only in all secular establishments, but also in the churches of the world, if only because these churches, however immaculate they may be in theory, are administered by human beings. It is not easy to overlook this element in the papacy, even though one does not go so far as to say roundly with Tyrrell: "Rome cares nothing for religion — only for power." The very divinities that men have set up often impress one as being in a considerable measure their pooled self-esteem. "We are glad," as Dryden says, "to have God on our side to maul our enemies, when we cannot do the work ourselves." Jonathan Edwards has genuine religious elevation; but the Jehovah in whose "fierceness" he plainly rejoices, and who tramples sinners under his feet until their blood is "sprinkled on his garments," might lead some to dismiss Edwards as a theological imperialist. . . .

It goes without saying that the imperialistic element I have noted in religious beliefs, as well as in those who administer them, is not the whole story. Above all, it is not the whole story in the case of Christianity. Christianity has actually done much to curb the expansive lusts of the human heart, and among its other lusts, the lust for power. . . . Christianity in its medieval form actually did secure for Europe no small degree of spiritual unity and cohesion . . . .

Judged by any quantitative test, the American achievement is impressive. We have ninety percent of the motors of the world and control seventy-five percent of its oil; we produce sixty percent of the world's steel, seventy percent of its copper, and eighty percent of its tele-

phones and typewriters. This and similar statistical proof of our material preeminence, which would have made a Greek apprehensive of Nemesis, seems to inspire in many Americans an almost lyrical complacency. They are not only quantitative in their estimates of our present accomplishment, but even more so if possible in what they anticipate for the future. . . .

If quantitatively the American achievement is impressive, qualitatively it is somewhat less satisfying. What must one think of a country, asks one of our foreign critics, whose most popular orator is W. J. Bryan, whose favorite actor is Charlie Chaplin, whose most widely read novelist is Harold Bell Wright, whose best-known evangelist is Billy Sunday, and whose representative journalist is William Randolph Hearst? What one must evidently think of such a country, even after allowing liberally for overstatement, is that it lacks standards. Furthermore, America suffers not only from a lack of standards, but also not infrequently from a confusion or an inversion of standards. . . .

The problem of standards, though not identical with the problem of democracy, touches it at many points and is not therefore the problem of any one country. Europeans, indeed, like to look upon the crudity and chaotic impressionism of people who are no longer guided by standards as something specifically American. . . . The deference for standards has, however, been diminished by a certain type of democracy in many other countries besides America. The resulting vulgarity and triviality are more or less visible in all of these countries . . . . If we in America are perhaps preeminent in lack of distinction, it is because of the very completeness of our emancipation from the past. Goethe's warning as to the retarding effect of the commonplace is well known (*Was uns alle bündigt, das Gemeine*). His explanation of what makes for the commonplace is less familiar: "Enjoyment," he says, "makes common" (*Geniessen macht gemein*). Since every man desires happiness, it is evidently no small matter whether he conceives of happiness in terms of work or of enjoyment. If he work in the full ethical sense that I have attempted to define, he is pulling back and disciplining his temperamental self with reference to some standard. In short, his temperamental self is, in an almost literal sense, undergoing conversion. The whole of life may, indeed, be summed up in the words diversion and conversion. Along which of these two main paths are most of us seeking the happiness to the pursuit of which we are dedicated by our Declaration of Independence? The author of this phrase, Thomas Jefferson, remarks of himself: "I am an Epicurean."<sup>13</sup> It cannot be gainsaid that an increasing number of our young people are, in this respect at least, good Jeffersonians. The phrase that

reflects most clearly their philosophy of life is perhaps "good time." . . .

One is inclined, indeed, to ask, in certain moods, whether the net result of the movement that has been sweeping the Occident for several generations may not be a huge mass of standardized mediocrity; and whether in this country in particular we are not in danger of producing in the name of democracy one of the most trifling brands of the human species that the world has yet seen. To be sure, it may be urged that, though we may suffer loss of distinction as a result of the democratic drift, by way of compensation a great many average people will, in the Jeffersonian sense at least, be made "happy." If we are to judge by history, however, what supervenes upon the decline of standards and the disappearance of leaders who embody them is not some egalitarian paradise, but inferior types of leadership. We have already been reminded by certain developments in this country of Byron's definition of democracy as an "aristocracy of blackguards." At the very moment when we were most vociferous about making the world safe for democracy the citizens of New York refused to reelect an honest man as their mayor and put in his place a tool of Tammany, an action followed in due course by a "crime wave"; whereupon they returned the tool of Tammany by an increased majority. The industrial revolution has tended to produce everywhere great urban masses that seem to be increasingly careless of ethical standards. In the case of our American cities, the problem of securing some degree of moral cohesion is further complicated by the presence of numerous aliens of widely divergent racial stocks and cultural backgrounds.<sup>14</sup> . . .

We are assured, indeed, that the highly heterogeneous elements that enter into our population will, like various instruments in an orchestra, merely result in a richer harmony; they will, one may reply, provided that, like an orchestra, they be properly led. Otherwise the outcome may be an unexampled cacophony. This question of leadership is not primarily biological, but moral. Leaders may vary in quality from the man who is so loyal to sound standards that he inspires right conduct in others by the sheer rightness of his example, to the man who stands for nothing higher than the law of cunning and the law of force, and so is, in the sense I have sought to define, imperialistic. If democracy means simply the attempt to eliminate the qualitative and selective principle in favor of some general will, based in turn on a theory of natural rights, it may prove to be only a form of the vertigo of the abyss. As I have tried to show in dealing with the influence of Rousseau on the French Revolution, it will result practically, not in equality, but in a sort of inverted aristocracy. One's choice may be, not

between a democracy that is properly led and a democracy that hopes to find the equivalent of standards and leadership in the appeal to a numerical majority, that indulges in other words in a sort of quantitative impressionism, but between a democracy that is properly led and a decadent imperialism. One should, therefore, in the interests of democracy itself seek to substitute the doctrine of the right man for the doctrine of the rights of man.

The opposition between traditional standards and an egalitarian democracy based on the supposed rights of man has played an important part in our own political history, and has meant practically the opposition between two types of leadership. The "quality" in the older sense of the word suffered its first decisive defeat in 1829 when Washington was invaded by the hungry hordes of Andrew Jackson. The imperialism latent in this type of democracy appears in the Jacksonian maxim: "To the victors belong the spoils." In his theory of democracy Jackson had, of course, much in common with Thomas Jefferson. If we go back, indeed, to the beginnings of our institutions, we find that America stood from the start for two different views of government that have their origin in different views of liberty and ultimately of human nature. The view that is set forth in the Declaration of Independence assumes that man has certain abstract rights; it has therefore important points of contact with the French revolutionary "idealism." The view that inspired our Constitution, on the other hand, has much in common with that of Burke. If the first of these political philosophies is properly associated with Jefferson, the second has its most distinguished representative in Washington. The Jeffersonian liberal has faith in the goodness of the natural man, and so tends to overlook the need of a veto power either in the individual or in the state. The liberals of whom I have taken Washington to be the type are less expansive in their attitude toward the natural man. Just as man has a higher self that acts restrictively on his ordinary self, so, they hold, the state should have a higher or permanent self, appropriately embodied in institutions, that should set bounds to its ordinary self as expressed by the popular will at any particular moment. The contrast that I am establishing is, of course, that between a constitutional and a direct democracy. There is an opposition of first principles between those who maintain that the popular will should prevail, but only after it has been purified of what is merely impulsive and ephemeral, and those who maintain that this will should prevail immediately and unrestrictedly. The American experiment in democracy has, therefore, from the outset been ambiguous, and will remain so until the irrepressible conflict between a

Washingtonian and a Jeffersonian liberty has been fought to a conclusion. The liberal of the type of Washington has always been very much concerned with what one may term the unionist aspect of liberty. This central preoccupation is summed up in the phrase of Webster: Liberty and union, one and inseparable. The liberty of the Jeffersonian, on the other hand, makes against ethical union like every liberty that rests on the assertion of abstract rights. . . .

Jefferson . . . associated his liberty, not with God, but with "nature." He admired, as is well known, the liberty of the American Indian.<sup>15</sup> He was for diminishing to the utmost the role of government, but not for increasing the inner control that must, according to Burke, be in strict ratio to the relaxation of outer control. When evil actually appears, the Jeffersonian cannot appeal to the principle of inner control; he is not willing again to admit that the sole alternative to this type of control is force; and so he is led into what seems at first a paradoxical denial of his own principles; he has recourse to legislation. It should be clear at all events that our present attempt to substitute social control for self-control is Jeffersonian rather than puritanical. . . .

Standardization is . . . a less serious menace to standards than what are currently known as "ideals." The person who breaks down standards in the name of ideals does not seem to be impelled by base commercial motives, but to be animated, on the contrary, by the purest commiseration for the lowly and the oppressed. We must have the courage to submit this humanitarian zeal to a close scrutiny. We may perhaps best start with the familiar dictum that America is only another name for opportunity. Opportunity to do what? To engage in a scramble for money and material success, until the multimillionaire emerges as the characteristic product of a country dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal? According to Napoleon, the French Revolution was also only another name for opportunity (*la carrière ouverte aux talents*). Some of our commercial supermen have evidently been making use of their opportunity in a very Napoleonic fashion. In any case, opportunity has meaning only with reference to some true standard. The sentimentalist, instead of setting up some such standard by way of protest against the wrong type of superiority, inclines rather to bestow an unselective sympathy on those who have been left behind in the race for economic advantage. Even when less materialistic in his outlook, he is prone to dodge the question of justice. He does not ask whether a man is an underdog because he has already had his opportunity and failed to use it, whether, in short, the man that he takes to be a victim of the social order is not rather a victim of his own

misconduct<sup>16</sup> or at least of his own indolence and inattention. He thus exposes himself to the penalties visited on those who set out to be kinder than the moral law.

At bottom the point of view of the "uplifter" is so popular because it nourishes spiritual complacency; it enables a man to look on himself as "up" and on some one else as "down." But there is psychological if not theological truth in the assertion of Jonathan Edwards that complacent people are a "particular smoke" in God's nostrils. A man needs to look, not down, but up to standards set so much above his ordinary self as to make him feel that he is himself spiritually the underdog. The man who thus looks up is becoming worthy to be looked up to in turn, and, to this extent, qualifying for leadership. Leadership of this type, one may add, may prove to be, in the long run, the only effectual counterpoise to that of the imperialistic superman.

No amount of devotion to society and its supposed interests can take the place of this inner obeisance of the spirit to standards. The humanitarian would seem to be caught here in a vicious circle. If he turns from the inner life to serve his fellow men, he becomes a busy-body. If he sets out again to become exemplary primarily with a view to the benefit of others, he becomes a prig. Nothing

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***"If there had been no Rousseau, Napoleon is reported to have said, there would have been no Revolution, and without the Revolution, I should have been impossible."***

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will avail short of humility. Humility, as Burke saw, is the ultimate root of the justice that should prevail in the secular order, as well as of the virtues that are specifically religious. The modern problem, I have been insisting, is to secure leaders with an allegiance to standards, now that the traditional order with which Burke associated his standards and leadership has been so seriously shaken. Those who have broken with the traditional beliefs have thus far shown themselves singularly ineffective in dealing with this problem of leadership, even when they have admitted the need of leaders at all. The persons who have piqued themselves especially on being positive have looked for leadership to the exponents of physical science. Auguste Comte, for example, not only regarded men of science as the true modern priesthood, but actually disparaged moral effort on the part of the individual. I scarcely need to repeat here what I have said elsewhere—that the net result of a merely scientific "progress" is to produce efficient megalomaniacs. . . .

One cannot grant that an aristocracy of scientific intellectuals or indeed any aristocracy of intellect is what

we need. This would mean practically to encourage the *libido sciendi* and so to put pride in the place of humility. Still less acceptable would be an aristocracy of artists; as the word art has come to be understood in recent times, this would mean an aristocracy of aesthetes who would attempt to base their selection on the *libido sentiendi*. The Nietzschean attempt, again, to found the aristocratic and selective principle on the sheer expansion of the will to power (*libido dominandi*) would lead in practice to horrible violence and finally to the death of civilization. . . .

The democratic idealist is prone to make light of the whole question of standards and leadership because of his unbounded faith in the plain people. How far is this appeal to the plain people justified and how far is it merely demagogic? There is undoubted truth in the saying that there is somebody who knows more than anybody, and that is everybody. Only one must allow everybody sufficient time to sift the evidence and add that, even so, everybody does not know very much. Burke told the electors of Bristol that he was not flattering their opinions of the moment, but uttering the views that both they and he must have five years thence. Even in this triumph of the sober judgment of the people over its passing impression, the role of the true leader should not be underestimated. Thus in the year 1795 the plain people of America were eager to give the fraternal accolade to the French Jacobins. The great and wise Washington opposed an alliance that would almost certainly have been disastrous. . . .

A democracy, the realistic observer is forced to conclude, is likely to be idealistic in its feelings about itself, but imperialistic about its practice. The idealism and the imperialism, indeed, are in pretty direct ratio to one another. For example, to be fraternal in Walt Whitman's sense is to be boundlessly expansive, and a boundless expansiveness, is, in a world like this, incompatible with peace. Whitman imagines the United States as expanding until it absorbs Canada and Mexico and dominates both the Atlantic and the Pacific—a program that would almost certainly involve us in war with the whole world. If we go, not by what Americans feel about themselves, but by what they have actually done, one must conclude that we have shown ourselves thus far a consistently expansive, in other words, a consistently imperialistic, people.<sup>17</sup> We have merely been expanding, it may be replied, to our natural frontiers; but we are already in the Philippines, and manifestly in danger of becoming involved in Asiatic adventures. Japan, a country with fifty-seven million inhabitants (increasing at the rate of about six hundred thousand a year), on a group of islands not as large as the state of California, only seventeen percent of

which is arable, has at least a plausible pretext for reaching out beyond her natural frontiers. But for us, with our almost limitless and still largely undeveloped resources, to risk the horrors of war under modern conditions for anything we are likely to gain from expanding eastward, would be an extreme example of sheer restlessness of spirit and of an intemperate commercialism. . . . We are willing to admit that all other nations are self-seeking, but as for ourselves, we hold that we act only on the most disinterested motives. We have not as yet set up, like revolutionary France, as the Christ of Nations, but during the late war we liked to look on ourselves as at least the Sir Galahad of Nations. If the American thus regards himself as an idealist at the same time that the foreigner looks on him as a dollar-chaser, the explanation may be due partly to the fact that the American judges himself by the way he feels, whereas the foreigner judges him by what he does.

This is not, of course, the whole truth. Besides our tradition of idealism there is our unionist tradition based on a sane moral realism. "It is a maxim," says Washington, "founded on the universal experience of mankind, that no nation is to be trusted further than it is bound by its interests; and no president, statesman or politician will venture from it." All realistic observation confirms Washington. Those who are inspired by his spirit believe that we should be nationally prepared, and then that we should mind our own business. The tendency of our idealists, on the other hand, is to be unprepared and then to engage in more or less general meddling. A third attitude may be distinguished that may properly be associated with [Theodore] Roosevelt. The follower of Roosevelt wants preparedness, only he cannot, like the follower of Washington, be counted on to mind his own business. The humanitarian would, of course, have us meddle in foreign affairs as part of his program of world service. Unfortunately, it is more difficult than he supposes to engage in such a program without getting involved in a program of world empire. The term sentimental imperialism may be applied to certain incidents in ancient Roman history.<sup>18</sup> Some of the motives that we professed for entering the Great War remind one curiously of the motives that men like Flamininus professed for going to the rescue of Greece. Cicero, writing over a century later and only a few months before his assassination by the emissaries of the Triumvirs, said that he himself had once thought that Rome stood for world service rather than for world empire, but that he had been bitterly disillusioned. He proceeds to denounce Julius Caesar, the imperialistic leader *par excellence*, as a demon in human form who did evil for its own sake. But Caesar had at least the merit of seeing that the Roman

ethos was changing, that as the result of the breakdown of religious restraint (for which Stoical "service" was not an adequate substitute), the Romans were rapidly becoming unfit for republican institutions. . . .

Are we witnessing a similar moral deliquescence in this country, and, if so, how far has it gone? One of our foreign critics asserts that we have already reached the "Heliogabalus stage" — which is absurd. But at the same time it is not to be denied that the naturalistic notion of liberty has undermined in no small measure the two chief unifying influences of the past—the church and the family. The decline in the discipline of the family has been fairly recent. Persons are still living who can remember the conditions that prevailed in the Puritan household.<sup>19</sup> The process of emancipation from the older restraint has not usually presented itself as a lapse into mere materialism. Idealism in the current sense of that term has tended to take the place of traditional religion. The descendants of the Puritans have gone in for commercialism, to be sure, especially since the Civil War, but it has been commercialism tempered by humanitarian crusading. As I have pointed out, the humanitarian does not, like the genuine Puritan, seek to get at evil in the heart of the individual, so that he is finally forced to resort to outer regulation. The egoistic impulses that are not controlled at their source tend to prevail over an ineffectual altruism in the relations of man with man and class with class. The special mark of materialism, which is to regard property, not as a means to an end, but as an end in itself, is more and more visible. The conservative nowadays is interested in conserving property for its own sake and not, like Burke, in conserving it because it is an almost indispensable support of personal liberty, a genuinely spiritual thing. As for the progressive, his preoccupation with property and what he conceives to be its just distribution amounts to a morbid obsession. Orderly party government will become increasingly difficult if we continue to move in this direction, and we shall finally be menaced by class war, if, indeed, we are not menaced by it already. Every student of history is aware of the significance of this particular symptom in a democracy. One may sum up what appears to be our total trend at present by saying that we are moving through an orgy of humanitarian legalism toward a decadent imperialism.

### Notes

1. *Introduction à l'Iconographie de J.-J. Rousseau*, pp. vii-viii.
2. I have cited some of these passages in *Rousseau and Romanticism*, p. 194 n.
3. See *Political Writings* (Vaughan), II, p. 172.
4. See the opening paragraphs of *Emile* ("Tout patriote est dur aux étrangers," etc.).

5. *Political Writings* (Vaughan), I, p. 392 n.
6. Cf. Chateaubriand, *Mémoires d'Outre-Tombe*, II, pp. 12-14.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 243.
8. Both monarchists and revolutionary idealists had of course other motives in addition to those they professed. For this whole period, see E. Bourgeois, *Manuel historique de politique étrangère*, II, pp. 1-184.
9. According to M. Chuquet, the remark of Goethe to which I refer dates from 1820 and not from the evening of the battle (September 20, 1792). See article in *Revue hebdomadaire*, December 18, 1915.
10. "La Révolution française fut le fait générateur de l'idée de l'unité allemande." Renan, *Réforme intellectuelle et morale*, p. 130.
11. See Coleridge's *France: An Ode*. For corresponding German developments, see G. P. Gooch, *Germany and the French Revolution*, *passim*.
12. This point has been well made by Mr. J. Middleton Murry in his essay on "The Nature of Civilization" (*The Evolution of an Intellectual*, p. 168).
13. *Works* (ed. Ford), x, p. 143.
14. For example, 41 percent of the residents of New York City are actually foreign-born; if we add those whose father or mother or both were born abroad, the more or less foreign element in its population amounts to 80 percent. [These figures refer to the early 1920s.—ed.]
15. See *Works* (ed. Ford), III, p. 195.
16. "This is a chain of galley slaves," cried Sancho, "who are going to the galleys." . . . "Be it how it may," replied Don Quixote, "these people, since they are being taken, go by force and not of their own will. . . . Here comes in the exercise of my office, to redress outrages and to succor and aid the afflicted." "Let your worship reflect," said Sancho, "that justice, which is the King's self, does no violence or wrong to such people, but chastises them in punishment of their crimes." (*Don Quixote*, Part I, ch. XXII.).
17. This consistent imperialism has been traced by H. H. Powers in his volume *America Among the Nations*.
18. See Tenney Frank's *Roman Imperialism*, especially chap. 8 ("Sentimental Politics").
19. Professor G. H. Palmer has written from his own memories an article on "The Puritan Home" (*Atlantic Monthly*, November 1921).

### 'Humanitas' to Become An Academic Journal

The National Humanities Institute is pleased to announce that, beginning with the next issue, *Humanitas* will be expanded and will appear in a new journal format. In its new form, *Humanitas* will appear twice yearly during the fall and spring semesters of the academic year, commencing with the Fall 1992 number. The new *Humanitas* will better serve the Institute's growing scholarly readership by publishing more articles and reviews.

The aim of *Humanitas* will be to provide a forum for new scholarly thinking in the humanities, including the social disciplines. The journal will diagnose the problems of contemporary society and their origins and will explore the possibilities for recreating civilized life. Articles are invited that attempt to distinguish utopian and escapist thought and imagination from firm human ground. Authors will explore the relation of universality to man's historical existence. Particular emphasis will be placed on problems in which issues of ethics, logic, aesthetics, economics, and politics intersect and illuminate each other.

An additional note: NHI's other periodical, the *National Humanities Bulletin*, will be expanded to four pages and will appear semiannually in the winter and summer.